

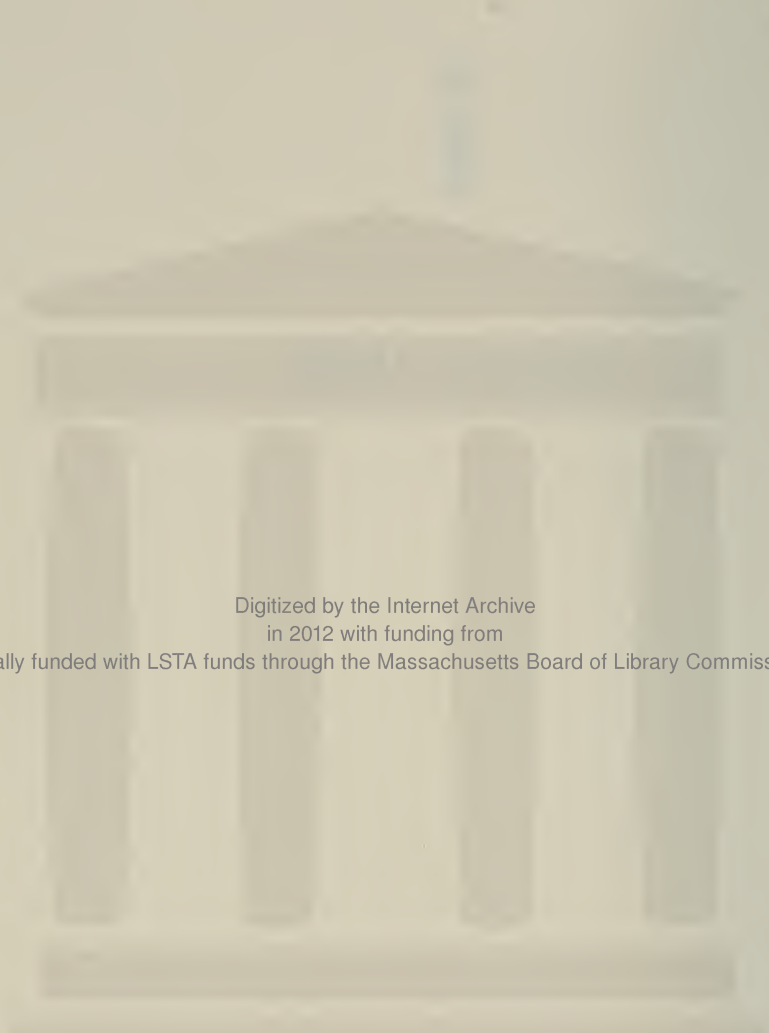
File 'A' Archives



i magazine

i

winter 1988



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and the next day
you left a red cactus blossom
with a note --
"I found this growing from my lips
this morning."
and the next week
you left an apple core --
"Well, Eve, I've finished the apple
but with you
I feel I've been kicked into Eden."
well, Adam,
this morning I woke
feeling lonely and cold.
you were there but
you see me of late through vacant eyes.

Susan O'Neill

Smitty

I almost stumbled over him as I struggled down the wooded slope, bag of charcoal under one arm and picnic goodies in the other. He was covered from head to toe with old dry leaves that seemed to have been glued in place with the last Autumn breezes. "God damn drunk," someone sneered from across the way . . . , but he never stirred. "Christ! Is he dead?" I gasped as I stared at the pile of leaves in front of me. "Hell, no, . . . it's only Smitty," replied my friend as he kneeled down and gave the clump of crackling leaves a gentle poke . . . "Boxcar Smitty."

As I deposited the hamburgers and pickles and chips on the weather-beaten picnic table and scraped last year's sticky-white charcoal residue off the grill, I glanced back at the curious character lying on the ground. Like an animal lazily emerging from hibernation, he slowly and shakily shifted up onto one elbow and through groggy, squinty eyes surveyed his intruders. There was something about that face . . . boozy eyes and all . . . and I trudged over and sat down next to him. "You're a bee-yoo-de-ful lady," he slurred, reeking of wine, and held up a filthy shaking hand. I reached down and offered mine and he held it tight. "Yeah," I said, "and you're beautiful too, Smitty." He managed a feeble smile.

"Ya hungry? How 'bout a burger?"

"Nah . . . , just talk t 'me . . . I ain't seen a lady for so long." He talked of long ago days . . . , and sons and a long ago wife named Emmy and jobs and binges and happy times and benders and sad times and months in his boxcar and hunger and memories and cops and hazy times and forgotten times . . . , and he told me I was a beautiful lady . . . , and again I replied, "You're beautiful too, Smitty."

He shook off some of his leafy blanket and staggered with me down to the stream where our day's stash of wine and beer was cooling in the water. I hesitated, at first thinking better of it . . . , and then handed the old man a bottle. "Have one on me, Smitty," I smiled, and he cradled it under his arm like an old friend, flopping back down onto familiar ground.

I left him there to begin his own private journey back into never-never land, and hiked a half-mile down the road to where a lone vender sat selling Sunday roses. I slipped him two-fifty and chose the reddest rose in the bunch.

As I approached the wooded site, I saw the familiar, motionless pile of leaves. Slowly and quietly I lowered myself beside the still form and with my fingertips softly nudged his arm. "Huh!" he was startled! "Who the Hell 'r you? What th' Hell 'r ya doin'?"

I pressed the rose into his grimy wrinkled old hand and said, "For you, Smitty." Off somewhere in another world, with just a glimmer of recognition, his cloudy eyes brimmed over with tears and he murmured faintly as he fell back into his booze-induced sleep. "Thanks, Emmy, you're beautiful." "You're beautiful too, Smitty . . . , sleep easy . . . sleep well."

Gerry Dech

clouds closed in
around me
one raindrop
found its mark
and drenched my soul.
it was you
that raindrop
weighing me down;
let me move on
and you
please try to understand me.

Susan O'Neill

Visions In Deceit

I was returning home. After having been out of the country for so many years, I decided to make the final part of my journey by bus. My intention was to enjoy the scenic ride. This I did not have the opportunity to do. It was not that my bus trip was unpleasant but rather that I met a young woman. We spoke, rather she talked, for most of my part of the trip.

I was late in arriving at the terminal and, as the other passengers had already boarded, I sat down in the first available seat. After settling myself for the day long trip I turned and greeted the young woman at my side. She was gazing out the window and seemed quite melancholy. Suddenly, she looked over. When our eyes met I was taken back by the depth of her slate grey eyes. We exchanged pleasantries and to my dismay she began to tell me about herself and confided in me a story that has left me quite disturbed.

"I'm from Providence, you know - in Rhode Island? Chicago seems like a good place for me. I suppose I'll be lost for awhile but maybe that's a good thing. If there's no one who could expect anything from me, then, well, I can't be a disappointment." She twirled some of her long hair around her finger, released it and repeated this action over and over again.

Continuing, "I had a boyfriend back home. We didn't see much of each other but every weekend that I could I went away to meet him. When I told my family about him, you know - they started calling me up, almost every day. They wanted to meet him. The girls in the office started asking me to lunch or for a drink after work. This one girl, Cindy, she became my friend and told me everything about her boyfriend, then began asking me about mine. In the beginning I didn't know anything about him, not even his last name. But as time passed I had more and more to tell them." She smiled and after taking a long draw from her cigarette, resumed with a bit of animation.

"My family was happy. Carolyn, my sister, well, she's married and money's pretty good for them. So, anyway, she starts taking me shopping, buying me nice clothes. This outfit do you like it?" I smiled and nodded; yes, she did look lovely. "You know, it's one of the sets she bought me." Her voice was lowering to almost a whisper. "Even my parents were giving me money, just a ten or a twenty to get my hair done or get some little thing so I'd look nice for him." She looked out the window for a long moment. I heard her sigh, there was a shine in her eyes as they locked with mine.

"Anyway," she said, "everyone was being so nice, I felt special, can't even remember getting so much attention from so many people. After a month or two Carolyn and Kurt really started pushing me to bring him over for dinner. I told them he traveled a lot, that explained why I went away each weekend. My folks, they were asking too and the girls at work. With the holidays coming up there were so many parties. I didn't go to many because everyone would be there with their husband or boyfriend. You know, everyone had someone. But they would call and, oh, you can't imagine the questions. It was getting more difficult to explain." Again she interrupted the story. I was becoming increasingly confused by this personal story, and was much relieved when the bus pulled into the parking lot at Howard

Johnsons. I left the bus, stretched my legs and decided to change seats when I reboarded.

She was in the cafeteria line when I entered the restaurant; I stood back in line watching her, those eyes, they had a soft, childlike appearance, a sadness. By the time I reached the bus I only wanted to put my arms around her.

We sat without speaking for some time. The strained silence became too much so I began speaking about my travels believing she would be fascinated with my tales, but she sat quietly listening, not really hearing. When I paused she asked, "Do you think I'm pretty? Could you be attracted to me?" I took her hand and squeezed, it was hot and damp. "You know, last month they followed me. They found out and that Monday they confronted me. I thought they loved me but Carolyn was really angry, she called me a liar and a thief. She asked over and over how could I do this to her. What could I say? She couldn't see how everything had changed since I had told them about him. My Mother, she called later, crying, she said pretty much the same as Carolyn had." After a silence she continued, "The next day I went to work and could feel everyone looking at me funny. But, how could they know? By the end of the week I couldn't take anymore and told Cindy what had happened. She called me a loony and left me sitting there. Anyway, the next week was hell: I was so alone, the phone never rang once, no one stopped over. The tension at work was more than I could bear. I went to lunch one day and never went back.

So here I am, on my way to Chicago. No one will ever know me." At this moment the driver called out my stop. I wrapped my arms around her.

As I was stepping off the bus I looked back. She was again staring out the window with those deep grey eyes.

Nikki Brownell

Sal

Sal stood at the bus stop with his racing form tucked under his arm. He was just about to check the time when the bus came around the corner. With his hand-made cane, he limped on the bus and sat in the nearest seat. I approached him, since I was on that same bus, same time every day to go to work. "Hiya, Jack, good to see ya," he said in a broken English. He was from Italy, originally, and spoke highly of the immigrants who boldly set forth to "make a better life" in America. "Hey Sal, what do ya know?" I asked, knowing that line was always an invitation for one of his experiences and thoughts in life. He smiled and commented on Reagan's torture of the poor, and the demented defense building in the U.S. "Not that it makes any difference," I put forth, "but I didn't vote for him." "Neither did I," Sal said seriously. With that we both laughed with a mutual understanding. Even though Sal found many problems with the state of welfare programs today, he was a devoted Democrat "since the days of F.D.R."

His grey hair had turned white which made him look more distinguished. The shoes his wife bought him three years ago were spit-shined and sparkled so much that one could see one's reflection. Sal took great care of his appearance and prided himself that at his very old age, he could still "put on his very own pants and tie his own tie." He offered an invitation for coffee after I got out of work. I took the offer and squeezed his arm before leaving. "Stay out of trouble, Jack, and look both ways before ya accept anything," he chuckled with delight.

The diner was loaded with people by the time my work was done. Sal came in with a new suit and stood at the door until he saw me. Sitting down, he smiled and his gold tooth gleamed. "Do ya know what tonight is?" he asked, knowing I didn't. "My wedding anniversary, me and Angela tied the knot on this day forty years ago!" he said proudly. His wife Angela had died two years ago of a heart attack that "left him alone to deal with the troublesome world." "What are ya doing to celebrate?" I queried. "Gonna visit the skating rink we used to skate at, and eat in the same gorgeous restaurant Angela loved so much." After the cheesecake vanished, he stood to leave and I gave him a wink and he cracked his famous smile while adjusting his hat. As he walked he had a certain dignity that only men with respect for themselves, and others, had. No talk of how lonely he was or how hard it was to live on minimal money. He enjoyed walking in parks, eating Italian food and talking. Wisdom was plentiful but he never pushed it in your face. Sal wasn't like that. He'd see you heading for a fall and let you because "that's how I learned." Afterwards, he'd be there with a concerned look and the most caring smile I'd ever seen. He waved from the doorway and headed for the ice pond, maybe to remember for awhile, or most probably to enjoy the moments he lived so fully.

Jackie Contaxes

Lucky

It was a quiet morning. It was always quiet after he left. She didn't play music or clatter dishes or putter around. She held on to the quiet of the morning the way she wanted to hold on to him.

The table was set with china and silver, still waiting for the omlette and muffins she had fixed while he showered. He had had just time for a cup of coffee but she could tell he had been pleased that she had bothered with breakfast. He'd go back to the skinny bitch that twisted him up in knots and jerked him around: the one he loved.

"Jesus," she shrugged her large shoulders and smiled wryly to herself. "I should thank her; if she wasn't such a skinny bitch I'd never see him. Ha! She'd have a stroke if she saw me, if she knew he was here."

She thought about how comfortable he was at her home, how comfortable he was with her. How most times he needed her to listen and to hold him and tell him things would be all right. Sex was quiet, comforting, passionless; part of what she offered to help him hurt less. She realized that she couldn't expect him to . . . Well, he loved the skinny bitch and she knew from experience that she was lucky to get what she got from him, her being fat and all.

She lifted her round bulk from the kitchen chair and moved slowly to the picture window. Her silhouette was blurry and indistinct. She looked soft.

"Yah . . . lucky," she whispered, staring out of the window, seeing the little fat girl of twenty years before, wearing clothes from the old lady department because none of the pretty stuff that her sisters got to wear would fit her . . . hearing her mother telling her friends " . . . but she has such a pretty face" . . . her dad promising her Go-Go boots and bell bottoms if she would lose weight.

They didn't have to worry about her staying out late or getting in trouble with the boys. They depended on her to take care of kids and things and gradually forgot that she was a kid too. Her sisters had curfews and boyfriends and prom dates and hassles with the parents. She was the shoulder to cry on for parents and sisters, the peacemaker, the giver.

"Yah . . . lucky," she sighed. She smelled him on her skin and wished he had kissed her before he left. Oh well, he was in a hurry. She turned away from the window and went towards the kitchen to start the dishes. She flicked on the stereo as she passed it.

Lisa Persons

you're leaving
today
me and the kids, well,
they still don't know
and
I can't help you pack
so
we'll go to McDonalds.
no -- I can't tell them over "Happy Meals."
maybe at the park
(will you have enough time?)
maybe we'll just
have a day and go home and --
my God
this is only
the beginning of the end.
I can't even say
"daddy's leaving."

Susan O'Neill

First Steps

Suzanne pulled the blankets up to her face. As the minutes passed the warmth brought a dull sense of security. The curtains were drawn, creating a brown lace that enveloped the room. With eyes now dry and long accustomed to the vapourous light, she looked around this room. Every kleenex, glass, plate and every crumpled piece of clothing seemed to writhe and moan. She got out of bed and walked through them, ignoring their cries. Suzanne reached for Jacob's picture, then turned on the little table lamp. It was an old photograph, taken when he was making his first steps alone. She remembered how he had grabbed for her hand, how the tears had streamed past his balled up fists when he couldn't reach her hands. This memory flooded back, vividly, brightly. Her eyes full and wet, a glimmer of a smile unfolded at the corners of her mouth. Oh, how she had encouraged him. The little boy, petrified, shaking, made one step then another. A smile, a laugh came from him as he soloed around the room. Her thoughts drifted back and as she looked around the silent mess she noticed it wasn't as dark as before. Rising slowly, lightly, Suzanne began to gather up the motionless, now silent clothes.

Nikki Brownell

you've been gone
for almost a month now;
i don't miss you and i
am glad.
loving words
once spoken so softly
turned sharp and cold
as icechips; the words
they echo still,
hover above our bed
and follow me.
the house is quiet except for that.
i walk from room to hazy room
chewing my fingernails
and smiling through tears.
you're gone and I'm glad.
if i knew where you were
i'd send this.

Susan O'Neill

Home Is The Soldier

A late fall wind whipped across the New York City streets, sending shivers of cold through the soldier's summer uniform.

"Burr! I never thought this would feel good," he thought as he stepped out of the cab at downtown Washington Square. He gave a warm smile to the cab driver, who had just driven him through Harlem for the last hour, and handed him a fifty dollar bill that the driver reluctantly took in his large black hand through the window.

"Thanks a lot," the soldier said, "and thank you for waiting for me." "OK, Corporal," the old driver replied, "I'm sorry you didn't find what you were looking for." He looked at the soldier's young face and sunken eyes and stared at the rows of ribbons that showed brightly on his green dress uniform.

"He's too young," he mumbled, as he watched the soldier cross in front of his cab, "too damn young."

The Village was crowded with people dodging each other along the narrow sidewalks on Blecher Street. The smell of pizza, sweet sausage, peppers and onions, somehow seemed strange yet familiar. He watched the faces of the young hippies and tourists that seemed to be watching him. It was a surrealistic carnival, with gypsies peering from their exotic storefront windows, and music flowing from the cellar coffee houses below. He was lulled into a quiet peace as he walked around the corner to Google's bar. The smell of whiskey broke his trance. He found a corner table and slowly sat with his eyes darting from face to face and then to the door. A dark-bearded man walked in wearing a blue denim jacket and striped, bell bottom pants. He had beads that hung at different lengths around his neck and as he approached the bar, the soldier saw an N.V.A. flag sewn on his back.

"Damn," the soldier thought, "I've seen more N.V.A. flags here than I saw in 'Nam'."

"What can I get you?" the waitress broke in suddenly.

"Ah . . . a dark draft and a shot of Fleishman's Whiskey," he replied, looking away from her blue eyes to her breasts, "and . . . a . . . a book of matches."

"Jesus," he muttered, watching the attractive waitress glide away in her long, long, quilt dress and Indian boots. He lit a Marlboro with a battered Zippo lighter that he turned over and over again in his hand. There was a slight groove that an AK round had made when it entered his thigh as another had ripped through his shoulder muscle above the collar bone. He could still hear cries of "Medic! Medic!" while rounds popped over the wailing of screaming wounded. He had struggled to roll over on his stomach and see the second Lieutenant running and shouting orders. Then the young Lieutenant's face had exploded with a red thud. Somehow he had managed to crawl and fire, . . . to crawl, fire and change magazines on his M-16. He crawled to the position where the gunner and A-gunner lay dead, and crawled over their bodies until he reached the M-60. He strained to feed the weapon as Charlie began to overrun the fire base perimeter. He screamed with pain as he began to feed and fire, . . . feed and fire.

The soldier sat rigid as the waitress put the whiskey and beer in front of him. He gave her \$2.00 for the \$1.25 bill and motioned for her to keep the change. She smiled

and looked at him curiously.

"Did you just get back?" she asked softly.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" he said.

"You don't have to call me ma'am," the waitress laughed. "Did you go to Viet Nam?" She looked at his nametag, "Did you go to Viet Nam . . . , Saari?"

He felt foolish and didn't know how to answer her.

"Yes, I did," he replied, then tilted his head and slowly poured the whiskey down his throat. It was smooth and warm, and didn't burn as he remembered. His hand trembled slightly as he put the shot glass down.

"Do you want another one, Saari?" the waitress asked.

"Yeah, please," he answered, washing down the whiskey with the sweet, dark beer.

She walked away, slowly peering over her shoulder and watched the soldier fidget nervously in his chair until he finally rose and stepped to the juke box at the side of his table. He dropped in two quarters, pressing the only three songs that he knew and turned to sit down again. He rubbed the beads of water on the side of the glass with his finger as the haunting lyrics of Jimi Hendrix seemed to overwhelm the steady drive of the bar. Every beat of the music reminded him of the steady thumping of manhole covers as the taxi screamed uptown.

"There ain't nothin left there anymo, son," the driver said gently. "De tore dat parto' Spanish Harlem down las' year. There ain't nothin left anymore."

The soldier shifted in the back seat, never taking his eyes from the window as the driver pulled over at East 122nd Street and Third Avenue. The grey haired cabbie turned around to see the pale look on the soldier's face and recognized the medals over his left breast pocket.

"Dis is it," he said, "Yo sure you want to get out here, son?" the driver drawled. "Dis ain't a safe neighborhood."

"Yes, I'm sure," the soldier replied, brushing a lock of blond hair off his eyebrow. "I used to live here once."

"Is dat right," the driver said with a smile as he accepted the fare and tip. "Yo sure you don't want me to wait?"

"No thanks, man, I don't know how long I'll be. I remember where the subway is."

"Take care of yo'self, Corporal," the driver said, as the soldier stepped into the cold, brisk air, and waved his hand.

He stood on the corner where the elevated train once rose mightily over the blaring traffic, and looked over two blocks of dust and crumbled brick. It looked like films he had seen of bombed out cities in World War II Germany.

"It's all gone . . . gone!" he laughed and pulled out a joint of prerolled, opiated Thai weed that he brought back from Viet Nam. He sucked hard on the joint, slowly walking west on 122nd Street, where each cracked sidewalk slab seemed to hold faint marks of chalk squares and numbers that he carefully and swiftly stepped around. He came to the ruins of a sunken alley that was filled with brick and rubble. The old iron railings rose and twisted from the debris and he gazed at the piping that he once played on as a boy. He felt his stomach turn as three rats scurried over the foundation that was once his home. He thought of his grandmother who lay dead in

her apartment for three days, unnoticed among her plants and flowers. The Army wouldn't let him come home for her funeral even though she had raised him after his mother's stroke. He pleaded in his letters for her to move to New Jersey and stay with his father, but she would never leave the apartment she lived in since she came from Finland. He grew furious as he envisioned the police ransacking her apartment looking for a hidden stash of money as she lay in a dry pool of blood.

He flicked the roach in a long arch and began a slow march toward Lexington Avenue, as the warmth of the opium spread from his head to his fingertips. He listened for the laughter of kids playing under the streetlights and the roar of box scooters tearing around the corners and up and down the street. As he neared the corner, the red taillights of traffic heading downtown looked like tracers from a fifty-calibre machine gun. Suddenly he was aware of the cold.

A Yellow Cab pulled over to the corner and an aged black face emerged from the window.

"You want a ride now, son?" the cabbie smiled.

He watched the faces of the Puerto Ricans as they stood almost motionless in front of bars and grocery stores. The cab wheeled in and out of the speeding traffic as the gentle driver kept glancing in his rear view mirror.

"My boy was in Viet Nam, too," the driver said as the soldier's eyes met his in the mirror. "He got some of the same medals as you . . . Purple Heart and a Silver Star. You mussa seen some action?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," the soldier replied. "I got into California yesterday. When did your son get back?"

"He was kilt last year," the driver said painfully. "He wern't no older den you. How old are you Corporal?"

The soldier felt a kinship with the driver and didn't mind the question, though it made him a bit uneasy.

"Eighteen," he replied, "I was hit two months ago. I just got out of the Army Hospital in Japan. I'm sorry your son was killed."

"Heh, Heh," the driver laughed. "Hell, he wuz a good boy, yes, indeed, a good boy." He reached for a pack of Viceroy cigarettes from his visor and paused before he lit it. "Now I watch de news and I jus shake my head . . ., my wife can't watch it no mo'."

"It's a long time since I watched Stateside news," the soldier carefully said. "I don't even know what they're sayin'."

"Ha!, Ha!" the driver threw his head back and beeped at another cabbie, "de sure as hell keep talkin' jive shit!" He roared a laugh that filled the cab so quickly the soldier forgot everything except the tears that rolled down his smooth skinned face.

"Saar? Hey Saari!" the waitress shouted.

The soldier snapped his head up as he quickly wiped his moist red eyes. His hand trembled as he fumbled for the cigarettes on the table and almost spilled his beer when he picked up his lighter.

"Here's your drink," she said with a serious face. "Do you want anything else?" She put the shot glass down in front of him, accepting his money and stepping back.

"Ah, . . . no, thank you," he replied, trying to steady himself.

She hesitated, to look at him again, then slowly withdrew as he snapped the shot

down with a flick of his wrist. She bumped into a dark-bearded man with a denim jacket and beads that rattled loosely on his chest. This man slowly walked to the jukebox, watching the soldier wipe the sweat from his forehead and run his hand through his short military haircut.

"Hey! You come here to shoot some Hippies?" the bearded man shouted.

The soldier could see the flag through his chest, and froze at the sound of his voice.

"Hey, Pig! How many babies you kill, huh?" the man taunted.

The soldier turned his head and looked coldly in the man's eyes. "How easy it is to kill you," he thought to himself.

"Hey, Pig!" the bearded man laughed as his beads shook around his neck, "why don't you answer me, Pig? How many babies you kill?"

The soldier rose to his feet as the bearded man stepped back toward the jukebox.

"You gonna kill me too, Pig?" he said. "You want to kill some Hippies, Pig?"

The soldier could hear each click of his boots as he approached the exit of the bar and he looked into the eyes of the waitress as he opened the door to the sudden rush of cold air. He stepped out to the sidewalk and started walking toward the corner looking for a Yellow Cab to pull over along side the littered curb.

He started a slow march to the subway and as a young couple flashed him a peace sign, he smiled and lit another joint.

"To hell with it!" He coughed in the cold. To hell with it! he thought again quietly.

Jeffrey Lakson

The Glass Safe

You can't get back, y'know. And it doesn't seem fair. Not to me anyway. God knows I have tried. But you just can't do it. No deposit, no return, y'know? And it hurts. It hurts like hell. It keeps me up at night. I swear to God it does. I don't know, maybe everyone feels the same way. It'd be kinda comforting to think so. But all I know is me. And that's enough, I guess.

Things were special then, that's all.

It's an atmosphere . . . a feeling . . . that surrounds adolescence, y'know? A certain clumsy beauty. A beauty that just isn't found anywhere outside that timespan. And it hurts to feel it's lost. It hurts real bad. Yeh, I know. Not another lost youth deal. But it's the way that I feel. And like I said, I guess that's enough.

It's just that things were real then. Confusing. Oh yeh. Like confusion was a prerequisite for growing up. But real. Sometimes even too real. But they were felt. Everything was felt with such intensely vulnerable passion, y'know? The basic things I mean. The real things. Trust. Love. Loyalty. Longing. The things that somehow seem to lose their impact as age, seemingly unannounced in its arrival, catches you off guard. And carries you away. Unarmed. To a material world where time is short. And memories are long.

It's incredible the way everything just mattered so much then.

Yeh, I know. You live in the past and you forget the present. Well, the present is fine by me. Really. And I've yet to find that my heart has died. But things were just special then. That's all. They were beautiful. And that special kind of beauty somehow locks itself away after awhile. In a glass safe, where you can see what's inside, but the key is in there too. And you can only sit there and look at it.

Kevin Dech

were i to entertain such thoughts
as having you again,
my heart might rise and choke me, nay,
don't test my strength again, i pray.

Susan O'Neill

His World

He reminded me of Popeye, short and slim but with the sailor's arms and eternal squint. He could toss a bale of hay as if someone were helping him. He spoke only to give instructions or advice when we were working, and his words were spoken around the ever present pipe which jutted from the corner of his mouth.

He plowed out of love for his land, but his favorite pastime was fishing, which he would practice clandestinely. In the middle of the afternoon he would stop plowing but leave the tractor running, for he knew my aunt would pause occasionally in her work and listen for the sound of the tractor beyond the hill. Satisfied he was working, she would return to her chores. He always kept a couple of fishing poles hidden near the pond. We never had to dig for worms, for he had put a white enamel bathtub filled with dirt nearby in which he kept worms for fishing.

He loved to match wits with the renegade crows on his farm and would not hesitate to dump me out of my billowy feather bed hours before sunrise to accompany him to hunt his squawking tenants. Easing through the cool, quiet morning woods, he would pick me up by the back of my shirt like a kitten if I placed a foot on a crisp leaf. Like a crafty old crow himself, sometimes he would squawk at them, not shooting, just to let them know he had gotten as close as he desired. Laughing as they scrambled to fly away, he would light his pipe and turn back to begin the day's work. As we walked, he would ask me if I had seen a certain plant or animal sign, explaining the importance of seeing these things, and the intricate relationships plants, animals and people shared.

I spent many summers with him, learning the value of hard work and gaining an appreciation and respect for the woods and its creatures. Teaching me values and respect for my surroundings, he gave me a sense of his world. He sits in a wheelchair now and can't communicate, hired help to do the work he once did as he watches. When I visit, I push him down the dusty overgrown road to the pond. Sometimes when I talk to him, I see his eyes focus on something behind me, and turning, I see the shape of a crow silently slipping into the woods.

Richard Sexton

Just A Nobody In The Closet

She lives in the closet. Sometimes she talks to me, begs me to let her out. Other times I don't hear her for a long time. She hides from me. I've never seen her. I've never looked. I've forgotten how she got into the closet. She's been there a long time.

Her voice is young and sweet and she gets scared real easy. I don't listen to her. I ignore her or tell her she's stupid, go away, nobody wants you and nobody loves you 'cause you're just a nobody in the closet. I don't hear her for a long time when I tell her that.

Sometimes she tells such beautiful stories, filled with light and color and magic and love and I wonder how she knows about those things, seeing as she lives in a closet. I tell her those dreams are stupid and can never come true 'cause she's just a nobody in the closet.

Sometimes I hear her playing games and laughing and acting silly and having fun. That drives me crazy and I tell her shut up you stupid little nobody. Quit laughing 'cause there's nothing to laugh about. I wonder what's so fun in a closet. You're just a nothing in the closet, go away, go away, I scream at her. She cries a lot. She tells me she loves me and wants me to love her. I tell her shut up, you're just a nobody in a closet and nobody's going to love you, least of all me.

She tells me about the day when we were six and I put her in the closet and told her I had to grow up now and she'd be safe in the closet until I could come back for her and take care of her. She tells me I promised to come back for her. Please, she says. No, no, no, you're a nothing in the closet and you're lying and making up stories and go away I tell her.

I remember and I hurt. I think about me and her and us and me. I don't want to open the door. I'm afraid. But my heart dares to do what my mind cannot and, once in a while, just for a second, I reach for the closet door.

Lisa Persons

. . . So yet again the truth evades my pen
and hides among the crumbling dusty phrases --
is lost amidst the fight to reel it in
through words which, though sweet, have been used
twice too often.

Susan O'Neill

Another Day At The Park

"I love you. Take care of yourself." She was telling this to the man who had reentered her life. The man was an old man with gray white hair, gray blue eyes and he always wore gray and blue. Never bend over in front of that combination. He was nervous standing behind the woman, looking across the pond from the stone gazebo. Under the whopping bush near the rocks a duck mounted another duck for a little afternoon delight. It had been years since the man had seen the woman.

"It was nothing new," she went on, walking toward the area of the park displaying rows of beautiful flowers. The man continued following the woman on the red brick pathway a few steps to the rear. "He was always saying he loved me. Take care of myself. There were no reasons to doubt him, Dad."

"Look at those guys go at it . . .," her father was saying.

The duck on the bottom suddenly flapped her wings and escaped from the other female duck before the couple realized what was happening. Unisex is wonderful. The ducks sailed in perfect harmony to the other side, low to the water until each one braked in flight near the rocks along the shore and buoyed safely.

"That's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, Honey. Did you see that?" her father said, stirred by nature's way of saying you haven't seen anything yet.

"Yes. Very pretty, Dad," she said.

"I'm sorry, dear. How are you doing with this terrible ordeal. The nerve of that man." Her father said this protectively, without malice in his heart.

"Oh, Dad, shut up and just listen," she said. "We are talking about the man I love. The man I married. The man who lifted me from great states of depression. The man who made me laugh . . ."

"Yes, the man who hung himself in your closet with that hideous sign taped to his . . . his . . . his buttocks," her father said forgetting himself. The sign her father, the ex-superintendent of schools, was talking about was an average white sign with red letters that read, KISS MY ASS FOR ME. Besides the sign and the nude body, a rubber stamp was pressed to one cheek. It was two red kissing lips. The deceased had bought the rubber stamp from a little shop in Vermont when they were holidaying during the foliage season. It was the best thing he had ever bought. The next best thing was his artificial legs he found at a yard sale.

"I'm trying to tell you something important and it is not easy," she said clinching to some space in her mind, hoping to relieve the pain in her heart. He was a pain in her ass and he had sexually molested her until the day she married Glenn. It was a sad day when the ex-superintendent entered his little girl's bedroom, disguised in a pig mask and black silk stockings on his feet. Here comes Piggy.

"I knew about the mask, Dad," she told him. Her father had no answer for that little bit of information. She had kept the secret all that time and only told her husband after he came home from the hospital. He was a veteran.

A bit of information the ex-superintendent was keeping to himself was what he was doing at the curb, talking to a sixteen year old street hooker while his little girl was playing basketball across town. During the game he told the others he had to go to the head. But he walked past the head, and outside he got into his car and drove across the city, finally stopping at a street corner for direction. He was arrested by

an undercover policeman. The ex-superintendent pleaded confusion and innocence. The newspapers had a field day. He is still appealing the decision and the loss of his job.

"Never mind," was all her father said.

"Never mind. You never minded me doing little favors for you. Sometimes Dad you are a real f--- jerk, first class," she yelled, breaking the silence in the park and getting the attention of all the children from Mrs. Thigpen's second grade. The class was on a field trip. Today was a day at the park. All eyes were on the couple in the stone gazebo. The children just snickered. By the time they reached Mrs. Thigpen's class they had witnessed over six thousand acts of violence on television. F--- jerk was Sesame Street spelled backwards. Mrs. Thigpen herded the children to the other side of the park. She recognized the ex-superintendent and that did it.

"That's no way to talk to your father. Look at your language. Ever since you've been married to that fag, your vocabulary has suffered. Listen to yourself, for Christ sake," the great educator said.

"Glenn was no fag," Mary said. And that was the truth. He was a little short. But he was never a fag. He wasn't like the other men. Glenn was an ex-marine. A war hero. And a young man with some serious major league mental health problems. That's all. "You make me sick." And she was.

"He didn't even like football, Hon," he said. "Are you all right?"

"No. I'm not all right."

"That guy did this to you."

"Glenn was a sweetheart, Dad, even though he was a little strange. Everybody has something strange about them."

"What about the condom business." Her father unloaded a bomb with that one.

Now that was one of Glenn's better ideas. He had the environment on his mind. He presented the all day condom to the Rotary Club. Toilet water is an important conservation issue. The plan was for each man and boy to wear a super size condom all day. One member of the Rotary Club had been insulted. The plan would destroy Wall Street. Brokers are only human. Stress was the unbearable issue. It meant that no one would trust their brokers under the enormous strain. The added weight was bad for the heart. What a price to pay for mankind. Presenting the idea was one of the reasons Glenn never got tenure. Glenn was a substitute teacher who taught creative writing in one of his father-in-law's schools. A sad day. It is difficult to change the way America thinks.

"Now, Dad, that had a chance to work," she said to a man who wore a pig mask and molested little girls and got arrested for soliciting sex from a prostitute and ended up painting fire hydrants for the city.

"The guy was nuts," her father said tauntingly.

"Dad. Glenn lost his nuts." And it was true. When Glenn was a marine, sweeping outside the wire early in the morning, a burst of AK 47's erupted the uneasiness. The funny thing was how wonderful mother nature can provide an ambush. The bullet that broke the silence ripped the nose off his face. It was like a knock-out punch from Marvelous Marvin Hagler's right hand, sending the marine to the ground for the final count.

Unfortunately, when the one-sided firefight started so did a Retrieve Claymore,

blasting at anything in its path. His body was thrown against an ancient bamboo pigpen. From the murderous ballbearings, Glenn lost both his legs below the knees.

It was the first time North Vietnam Army Regulars had crossed the DMZ and attacked an American unit. No one was to remain alive with the information. The soldiers executed the wounded and the dead. As a token to the war a soldier with a long bayonet planted the point of the weapon between the stubby legs and leaned on the rifle, destroying the scrotal area. On that day Glenn gave his all for his country, and a little more. God bless him.

When Glenn returned to the real world, room 502 welcomed the hero. He remained in a coma for several months. The staff at the V.A. hospital kept the room in total darkness. Although Glenn lost the ability to smell, he mumbled a lot. The topic of his mumbling was "I should have stayed in Canada." One night a wonderful thing happened and the hero in room 502 was given a gift. Someone wrapped a rubber pig snout on his bandaged head and in lip stick wrote, "Porky Pig lives again."

Mary was performing her rounds when she entered room 502. She was employed as a rehabilitation counselor. Nothing rattled her basket. Although room 502 was in darkness, something sexual in Mary stirred for the first time in her life. She was experienced, a semi-pro, women's basketball center at six feet seven inches. She did something she will never forget. She flicked her Bic. All her hostilities for men were gone. Love loomed in room 502. Mother nature can play a funny flute. After leaving room 502 Mary had a wet day. Most embarrassing.

It was months before Glenn remembered the ambush and the wedding. The chaplain had problems until Mary introduced a letter with Glenn's signature. Still, the chaplain felt the patient had rights. Glenn was heavily sedated and mumbled, "I should have stayed in Canada" throughout the ceremony. The chaplain was apprehensive with God's children and during the service the chaplain studied not only the bride but the groom who was wearing a rubber pig snout over the plaster of paris. When the Bible did not bring peace of mind to the chaplain, he said over and over to himself, "I should have stayed in Canada."

"Your husband," the ex-superintendent said to his daughter, "is a homosexual bastard. What other reason could there be for not having had any children."

"Glenn loved me. You have no right to speak about him this way."

"This guy you loved was a Communist. He was a member of the Gay Liberation Movement. He wanted to destroy Democracy in this country. He didn't vote for Reagan. He hated football. Honey, he hated football. That should have told you that he was not right." Her father punted to get a point across the goal posts that were Mary's ears.

"It was the war, Dad," she said. "It made him a little crazy."

"Your husband was one nuclear wastedump," the ex-superintendent said. And he was not too far off the truth. The foreign doctors at the V.A. hospital had needed a guinea pig for their accreditation. Glenn volunteered. A real hero will suffer at all cost for the benefit of mankind. The torturing became very attractive. Mary went on more road trips for the team. The marriage worked.

"That man you called a homosexual loved you, Dad. He told me to understand and forgive," she said to her father who had walked into some ducky pew.

"People are talking. The guy should never have hung himself in your closet. It was not the decent thing to do, if you ask me."

"No one is asking you," Mary said. "Glenn died with dignity."

It was another day at the park and the widow remembered all the wonderful and meaningful things a husband and wife did in marriage. But the closet door had opened and Glenn had been hanging among her clothes. He had urinated on her shoes. Mary was sure that probably the last words spilling from his lips were, "I should have stayed in Canada."

Joseph C. Melanson

I am protected from the
pelting rain. I smell it
through that bandana, one
drop reaches my tongue. ;
I wear a plastic coat,
keep the umbrella over
my head, boots on.
The sharpness can't
sting through

Nikki Brownell

The Sawmill

My cold, pruned fingers grasp another wet slab of oak. Clouds of sawdust blur my vision. Suspended particles cluster on my wet lips and clog my nose. Slide the board down the rollers, hit the block, pull the saw and stack the board. Slide the slab, cut another board . . . stack it. Why don't they have a machine to do this mindless work? I suppose that I need the money. An idle mind. Does she think of me? This job does me no good. I think too much. The hand on the time clock is glued to its face, a sad face. Four years of love -- enter emptiness. We still love each other, but . . . we can't. An imperfect goodbye, but still a goodbye. A terrible thing has happened. Too harsh to mention. It circles through my mind and crushes all thoughts of happiness. Will I ever get it back?

I've got to pay attention to this saw. Fingers are essential. "Hey, get to work!" "Huh . . . Oh, Yeah." Grab a board, slide it down, cut it, stack it. She tells me of a "someday," but my star of hope has flickered for the last time. Never. I don't even want a someday. Too much has happened. There is no sadness, just a vast hole, and nothing to fill it. I'll get used to it. What can I believe in now? I lived for our love. Mere existence isn't enough. I guess I miss her. The smell of this oak being cut sickens me. A sour stench. The buzz of the blade biting into the wood flies past my earplugs and smashes against my eardrums. Permanent damage, I'm sure. There's no one to talk to. I really don't have a best friend as I was always with her. Her smile. Spirits of hope torment me. Leave me alone. It will never be. My love for her, for anything, is dying . . . quickly. A bubbling melody, my internal tune, twisted into a droning funeral march. The nothingness that I float in becomes more familiar, more comfortable. She took a big part of me. I wonder if she keeps it in a box, along with pictures, wilted flowers and mementos. If there is a thing called hope, hope for oneself, I'll surely find it. Look ahead. . . Leave behind. Grab a board, slide it down, cut it . . . stack it.

Shawn Hebert

how do you
remember me?
by the times that ended us
or the beginning?
do you remember the cobwebs
in the back hall?
(i carry them in my heart now)
plastic coffee cups, cracked and stained,
were to me the best china.
we'd carry them out
to the weeds
in the morning
looking down to the river
or up through the trees;
 we'd laugh -
let's go back in
and make love one more time
in that overstuffed chair
then i'll play with the piano . . .
do you remember
how many hours we spent
riding on back roads past cows and fields and
 what else?
drinking warm beer and you'd sing
to Jimmy Hendrix and Jethro Tull.
"I don't like the group Traffic," you said,
"they blew my mind one time,"
and I said, "Stop the car, let's make love
 in the sunset."
and you did
and we went down with it.
do you remember Moose Brook?
and that i loved you?

Susan O'Neill

